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by Jerome Clark

REALITY MUTILATION

IN 1973 FARMERS and ranchers in several Midwestern states reported that their cattle were dying under mysterious circumstances. To all appearances persons unknown had killed the animals and surgically removed various body parts, usually the tongue, udder or sex organs. But the killers were peculiarly elusive, leaving no footprints or other evidence of their presence. And although the dead animals sometimes were found within viewing distance of the farmhouse, no one was ever caught in the act and investigating authorities could find no clues to the perpetrators' identity. Before long theorists were speculating that cultists, CIA agents or even extraterrestrials were responsible.

As the wave of mysterious "cattle mutilations" spread to Colorado, New Mexico, Texas and other states, rumor had it that human victims would be next. When clinical tests on the bodies of allegedly mutilated cattle indicated that the animals had died naturally and that the "surgically precise" wounds on the bodies were in fact the work of predators, farmers, mutilation enthusiasts and even some police officers suspected a conspiracy to cover up the terrifying truth.

My own interest in the phenomenon was sparked by an incident that occurred near my hometown, Canby, Minn., in November 1973. When I was investigating it I learned of similar cases in Kansas and Nebraska. I interviewed a number of farmers and law enforcement officers in those states and wrote an article for FATE ("Strange Case of the Cattle Killings," August 1974 issue). Soon afterwards I was getting letters from a Leavenworth, Kans., prison inmate who alleged that a large, well-organized satanic cult was performing ritual killings of cattle—and people. He said he would be willing to tell the whole story if, to ensure his safety, he could be transferred out of the federal prison system.

I showed the letters to Don Flickinger, a Minneapolis-based agent of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. Flickinger brought the inmate, and later another prisoner whose transfer the first prisoner had requested, to a county jail in Minnesota, took their testimony and spent the next few months fruitlessly attempting to verify it. Meanwhile, the prisoners broke out of the county jail in which they were being held. When they were recaptured hours later, the second inmate confessed that their motive all along had been to get into a rural jail, which they figured (correctly, of course) would be a lot easier to escape from than a federal penitentiary. The "supercult," it turned out, was a fiction they had fashioned out of prison rumors and their own freewheeling imaginations.

As time passed the issue of cattle mutilations grew ever more muddled. Most "mutologists"—Forteans who specialized in the matter—became convinced that UFOs were responsible, although they were hard-pressed to produce any solid evidence to support the idea. Skeptics, on the other hand, argued that there were few if any real cattle mutilations and that the entire phenomenon was, in the words of sociologist James R. Stewart, a "classic case of mild mass hysteria." My own growing doubts about the reality of cattle mutilations were fueled by the almost consistently negative findings of veterinary pathologists. As a lifelong disbeliever in conspiracies, I found the

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mutologists' cry of "cover-up" less than persuasive, especially in light of their inability to counter the critics' charges with a point-by-point refutation.

Of course "mass hysteria" is a phrase that is often employed all too loosely to dismiss troublesome phenomena which are not supposed to exist but which people continue to report anyway. But Forteans tend to forget that even if the term is sometimes misused, there *is* such a thing as mass hysteria and there are times that its operation can be convincingly documented.

Daniel Kagan and Ian Summers' extraordinary new book *Mute Evidence* (Bantam Books, New York, N.Y., 1984, 504 pages, $4.95, paperback) presents an overwhelmingly persuasive case for the skeptics' contention that, with a few exceptions, "cattle mutilations" existed only in the imaginations of farmers, ranchers, lawmen and mutologists. Kagan and Summers, investigative journalists of remarkable skill and energy, came to this conclusion after traveling through a number of western states and Canada, interviewing dozens of persons and subjecting the data they collected to independent analysis.

They reserve their harshest criticism for journalists and mutologists who, by posing as experts, kept the mystery alive long after its solution had been found. "None of the mutology buffs had access to any experts in veterinary medicine, livestock or any other fields that bore on the cattle mutilation question," they write, "and it was obvious that there was not one seriously qualified investigator in their underground . . . . They had nothing going for them, yet they controlled the opinions of literally hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of people, regarding cattle mutilations. Not one of their testimonies would be acceptable as expert or even informed in a court of law."

Kagan and Summers looked into practically every aspect of this complex, multifaceted mystery, producing a virtual encyclopaedia of information and answering just about every significant unanswered question. They show that all the supposedly mysterious aspects of the cattle deaths have mundane explanations, that excitable people jumped to conclusions that conflicted with common sense and the testimony of their own senses, and that the truth quickly got lost in

the atmosphere of rumor, exaggeration and paranoia that surrounded the animal deaths.

The authors point out that only veterinary pathologists are truly qualified to make judgments about the causes of an animal's death. But by the time the real experts got involved in the matter, "cattle mutilations" had taken on a life of their own and those caught up in the make-believe mystery refused even to consider the possibility that the truth behind all the uproar might be prosaic. Those who disagreed with them, as the veterinary pathologists almost invariably did, could only be doing so out of incompetence or sinister motives.

Yet there *were* real mutilations. Kagan and Summers separate these, however, from what they call the "mutilation *phenomenon*." The real mutilations were of two kinds: "copycat" incidents in which pranksters carved up the bodies of already dead cattle and ritualistic killings by cult members. The latter incidents occurred, for the most part, in Idaho, although some may also have taken place in Colorado, Iowa and Canada. These cults, however, were local groups; they were not part of a large, well-organized, well-financed national network, as claimed by Flickinger's informants and others.

Mute Evidence, one of the finest books ever written on a Fortean subject, should be read and pondered by everyone who is

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interested in the unexplained. It is an object lesson in the dangers of being caught up in one's own beliefs, in placing oneself in a "closed system, self-referential, solipsistic, which allow[s] no fresh information to enter unless it [is] properly polarized to support the prevailing attitude of mystery . . . ."

Kagan and Summers make much of the fact that mutology was a product of the "UFO subculture" and they are properly critical of that subculture for bringing it into being. At the same time they imply, without ever quite developing the argument, that the flaws of mutology precisely mirror the flaws of ufology. This is partly true and partly false.

Certainly there is no question that much, even most, of ufology is amateurish, naive and gullible and that many ufologists see mysteries where none exist. But it is also true that, unlike mutilation reports, the best UFO reports stand up well under the scrutiny of the experts, as has been demonstrated repeatedly throughout UFO history, from the Battelle Memorial Institute study to the Condon Report (which contains a number of well-documented, highly puzzling cases which the investigators admit they could not explain) to the French government's recent research project. Moreover, scientists have involved themselves in ufology, as they have not in mutology, and produced a body of solid scientific work. (A recent example is Bruce Maccabee's impeccable research on the New Zealand UFO film.) And unlike mutologists, ufologists do not have to resort to ad hominem attacks to defend their position; the literature is full of to-the-point responses to debunkers' efforts to explain away UFO data.

Unfortunately many persons are attracted to ufology not out of scientific curiosity so much as an adolescent fascination with mystery for its own sake. They aren't seeking answers; what they really want are more questions—as if there weren't enough of these already. It was in the end only natural that the mystery-mongers would be attracted to cattle mutilations. And perhaps, sadly, it is only to be expected that even after Kagan and Summers' thorough demolition of a mystery that never existed, cattle mutilations will remain, to some, yet one more of the world's unfathomable enigmas.

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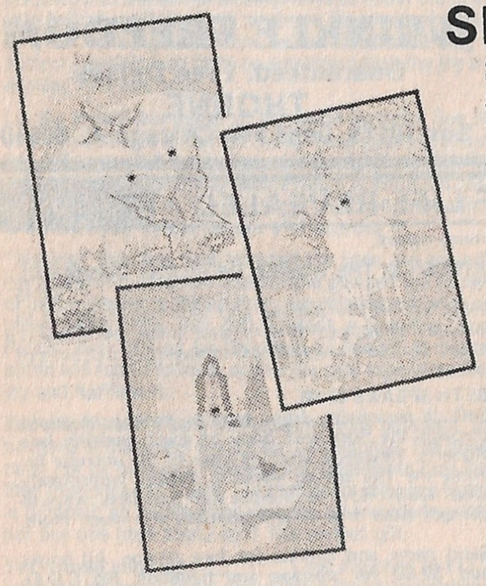

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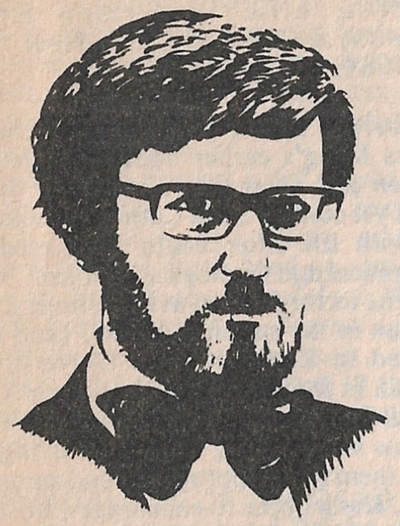

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